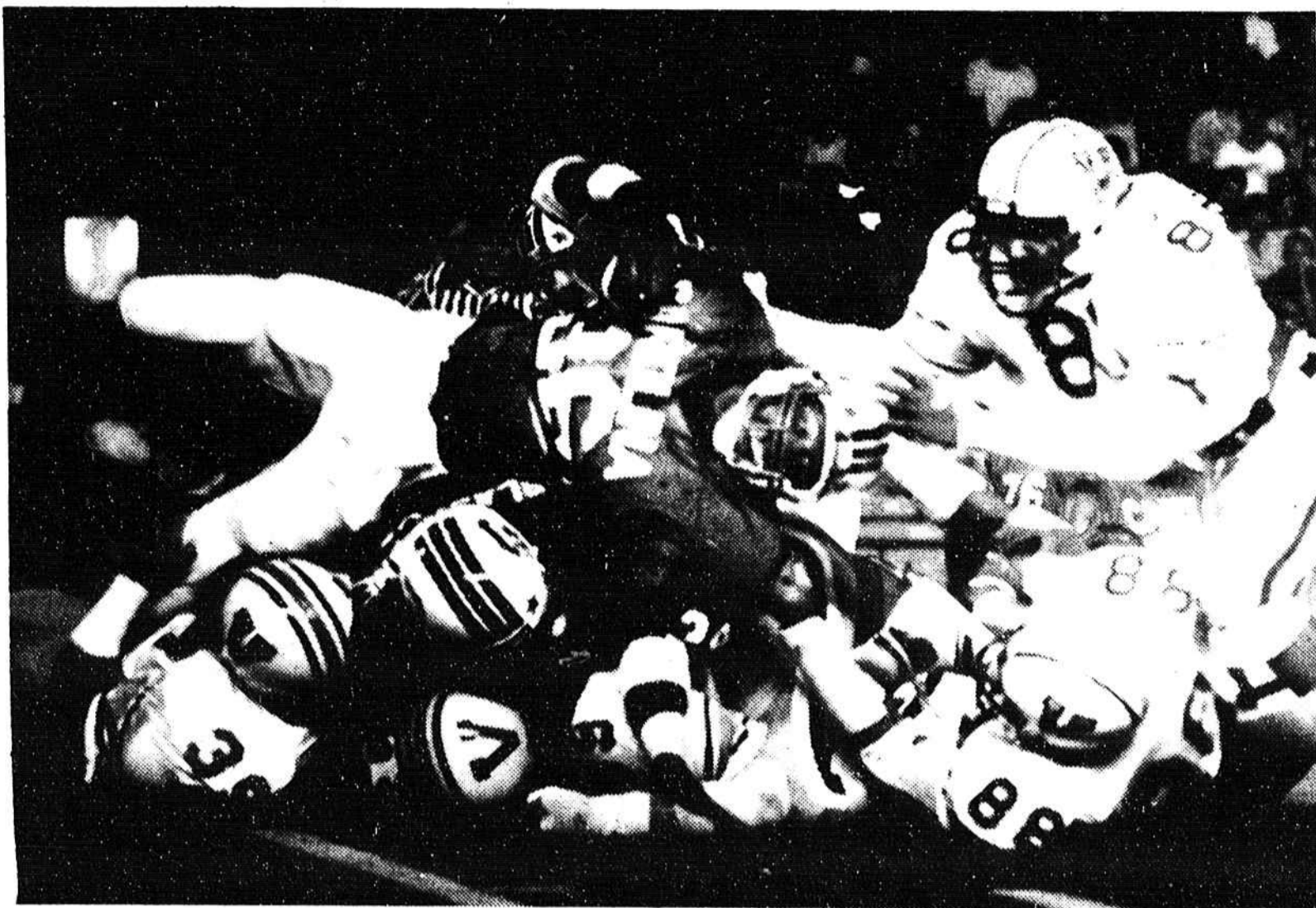


GAMECOCK SPORTS

Sputtering Carolina Defeats Cavaliers



Johnnie Wright dives for yardage in USC's Saturday night win over Virginia.

Staff Photo by CAPERS HAMMOND

By MARK PLATTE
Editor

To put Saturday night's Carolina-Virginia football game in its proper perspective, consider first the UVA Cavaliers and their recent accomplishments.

Since Virginia Head Coach Dick Bestwick was pronounced savior six seasons ago in an attempt to have a football team rival its basketball counterparts, resurrection may have turned into insurrection. Bestwick, after Saturday's 21-3 loss to USC, has won a meager 15 games in 61 attempts.

Their last victory, on Nov. 1 of last year against Tennessee, has provided the team with a fond memory that some of them have been sharing during their last nine consecutive losses.

Against the Gamecocks, who probably should have given punter Chris Norman half the gate receipts for almost single-handedly embarrassing the Cavs, UVA brought dropped passes and a non-existent defense back in vogue. Carolina, on the other side of

the line, brought such an inconsistent offense into the game that the USC 7-3 halftime lead was supplied by defensive back Troy Thomas' 44-yard punt return touchdown with 24 seconds left in the half.

USC scored twice more in the second half while quarterbacks Gordon Beckham and Terry Bishop split playing time. But it was Thomas on another spectacular punt return in the third quarter who brought the ball back down the field 57 yards to the UVA 19 to set up Carolina's second score. Two carries by Johnnie Wright for 16 yards and one three-yard run by Todd Berry increased the score to 14-3.

The final drive of the night started at the Carolina 44. After being sacked twice, Beckham completed a 25-yard strike to Horace Smith on third and 21. Then USC kept the ball in the sure hands of Kent Hagood, Todd Berry and finally Johnnie Wright, who bruised his way into the endzone at the 4:44 mark of the third quarter.

The 4-3 Gamecocks, See NORMAN'S, page 9.

Big Feet

Thomas, Norman Instrumental In Special Teams' Resurrection

By CHUCK WRIGHT
Staff Writer

Last week in Lexington, Ky., the poor performance by Carolina's special teams was about the only cloud in an otherwise silver-lined performance. Saturday night in Williams-Brice Stadium, the shoe was on the other foot, so to speak — more specifically, the feet of punter Chris Norman and kick return specialist Troy Thomas. Were it not for the outstanding job turned in by these two and their cohorts on the special teams, a Carolina victory wouldn't have come as easily against Virginia, if at all.

"We feel like Troy Thomas is a good punt returner . . . and Chris Norman kicked better than he has since he's been here," understated USC Coach Jim Carlen. "I think those two things along with our defense won the game without any reservation."

For certain, it wasn't a successful ball control offense that won it for the Gamecocks. Carolina managed only 44 yards total offense in the first half, making the Cavalier defense look awesome.

"THE FIRST half was a disaster on offense," said Carlen. "I was embarrassed. Their defensive people just outcoached our offensive people in the first half."

In fact, about the only thing the Carolina crowd had to cheer about in the first thirty minutes was Thomas' 43-yard TD punt return with just 24 seconds remaining in the second quarter. "Yeah, I think it came at a good time," laughed an obviously happy Thomas after the game.

"I think they thought I was going to call for a fair catch and they relaxed," Thomas said. "I just split the seam. I thought I was going to get tackled at first . . . and when the guy hit me and slid off, I just stood it up and picked up a couple of blocks . . . and ran it on in."

That gave Carolina its first lead of the night at 7-3, and seemed to swing the momentum in the direction of the heretofore punchless Gamecocks.

THOMAS STRUCK again in the third quarter. He fielded a Jeff Walker punt at the USC 25, dribbled it a few times, then streaked down the sidelines for 56 yards before being bumped out of bounds at the Virginia 19.

"No, that (dribbling) wasn't part of the plan" Thomas joked. "I was looking at the man running downfield and then when I looked up to catch the ball he was real close to me and I didn't have a chance to concentrate on it."

As so often happens, the bobble worked out for the best. Virginia's first wave of coverage flew by Thomas, opening up the sidelines for the Valdosta, Ga. sophomore. The return set up Carolina's second touchdown, a three yard run by Todd Berry. That upped Carolina's lead to 14-3, which looked safe considering the way the defense was playing and, especially, the way Chris Norman was punting.

"He's an exceptional punter, not an average punter, but an exceptional punter" emphasized Carlen after the game. And it's highly unlikely that he would have had any argument from the Virginia lockerroom.

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Troy Thomas looks for opening on punt return.

Staff Photo by CAPERS HAMMOND